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## **Ancestor Veneration**

In attempting to make sense of death and human experience many societies have drawn on a discourse that emphasizes the sacred nature of family ties. Such a discourse encompasses beliefs, norms, understandings and practices that foster continuing relationships between the living and the dead, in which the dead retain an active social presence in the lives of the living. These are explored by focusing on *sozen sūhai*, the Japanese form of ancestor veneration, as highly illustrative of the defining nature of discourses of death for the way people make sense of and structure their lives. The way Japanese people relate to their ancestors is examined through ‘beliefs about life and death’, ‘family dynamics’, ‘political imperatives’ and ‘personal expression’.

### **Beliefs about life and death**

Ancestral ties are deeply embedded in the Japanese psyche to encompass a familial devotion that is spiritual, even mystical in character. Indeed, *sozen sūhai* represents an indigenous faith that has remained separate from more formal religious traditions, though having absorbed elements of these, particularly Buddhism. As such, the ancestors or *senzo* represent the main source of religious experience for Japanese people, who tend to consider themselves a secular nation. However belief in an afterlife where one will eventually join the ancestors is widespread.

The mystical nature of family ties has its roots in early indigenous beliefs and customs that predate the influence of Buddhism, from which they have since been distinguished by the name of Shinto. These emphasize the presence and power of the natural world through the concept of *kami*, or spirits of nature on which the living depend for their existence. The sense of being surrounded and supported by spirits reflects an agrarian life-style based on continuity and harmony between the worlds of nature and culture through close-knit, enduring kinship groups whose dead members become *kami*. As such, they are objects of veneration.

With no distinct line between the living and the dead, or human and divine, the dead remain available to the living for support and protection, whilst continuing to depend on them for their well-being, requiring earthly nourishment and devotion from surviving kin. Without sufficient care and attention the dead may use their supernatural powers to cause trouble for the living. Indeed the dead are feared both for their polluting powers through the corpse as well as the potentially dangerous nature of the spirit. The well-being of the living thus depends on administering to their needs through rituals designed to placate, purify and petition them.

### **Family Dynamics**

The household or *ie* has been the main context for such beliefs and the rites that support them since the sixteenth century, to shape the moral foundation of Japanese society. Reflecting a discourse of continuity, perpetuity and harmony, the *ie* came to represent a spiritual community in which both living and dead family members were essential for its

existence and responsible for its welfare and continuity. Such values could take precedence over blood ties. Though ideally the perpetual existence of the *ie* is based on a system of unilateral succession that is patrilineal and primogenitural, in practice it is not synonymous with kinship. Outsiders may be adopted in if they prove more capable of ensuring the *ie*'s continued harmonious existence. These values are reflected in the mutual affection that characterizes Japanese ancestral ties, encompassing gratitude on both sides, the living for the legacy their ancestors have left them, and the dead for the continuing prosperity of their line.

From at least the eighth century Japanese families have engaged in *sosen sūhai* in a way that expresses family solidarity and mutual caring and support for both the spirits of the dead and their living relatives. Such mutuality includes the role of the living in ensuring that the spirit of the newly departed, the *shirei*, receives a safe and peaceful passage to the afterlife. Through a series of rituals, lasting 49 days, the *shirei* is divested of its polluting association with the corpse and attachment to the world of the living and set on the path to becoming an ancestor. This process is also designed to reassure the *shirei* of the family's continuing devotion and concern for its well-being. Otherwise it may become angry and resentful and cause harm to the living. Thus these rituals encompass a placatory dimension to ensure that potentially unsettled spirits become settled. Indeed, the concern of the living for the fate of the dead may extend to taking in those spirits who have no-one to care for them, reflecting the group-oriented nature of Japanese culture in which the greatest fear is of social isolation. Such concern is reflected in *o bon*, the major summer festival, which

welcomes the dead back into the community of the living, giving special place to those who have died since last *o bon*.

Strictly speaking therefore, recently deceased family members can be distinguished from the ancestors, though they will eventually gain ancestral status with the passage of time and appropriate rituals. Until then the dead form the focus of very personal relationships for as long as people are alive who remember them as individuals. These are conducted at the *butsudan*, the domestic Buddha altar, where offerings of food, water and flowers are regularly placed, incense and candles lit and prayers said. Conceived as a mini-temple, the *butsudan* houses the *ihai* or wooden tablet representing the deceased person's spirit and bearing their posthumous Buddha name, or *kaimyō*.

Eventually the remembered dead will fade from memory, lose their individuality and merge with the family ancestral spirit or *tamashī*. In the meantime, through a process of ritual purification culminating in a final memorial service on the thirty-third or fifty-fifth anniversary of death, they are rendered fully purified and benign. Thus fully-fledged ancestors tend to form a collective to whom ties with the living are no longer personal and vertical but rather collective and horizontal. In reality such distinction is less clear since personal memories may be passed down the generations and the conceptualization of ancestors is changing to accommodate contemporary urban life-styles and values (see **Personal expression**).

### **Political Imperatives**

The importance of ancestral ties to a culture based on close-knit, harmonious communities has been subject to political exploitation, early on forming part of the sixth and seventh century promotion of Buddhism. Then, more recently, the seventeenth century stamping out of Christianity by the Tokugawa government required all households to register at Buddhist temples. These then became the locus of ancestral rites with the Buddhist priest as the officiant. Prior to this ancestor veneration was a household-centered affair requiring no relationship with formal religion or the state. For the first time *sozen sūhai* took the form of a structured ceremony requiring temple and priests for its legitimation.

This political act resulted in a new popular form of Buddhism, which prior to this time was a religion of the upper and educated classes. Buddhism became central to *sozen sūhai* to which the institution accommodated itself and in so doing ensured its continued existence. This enabled the government to institutionalize devotion and loyalty to the emperor via such rites through the extension of people's sense of familial obligation. The ideology of *kokutai* was promoted as a mystical force residing in the Japanese people as a patriarchal nation in which all people are related to one another and to the emperor. The more horizontal dimension of *sozen sūhai* was thus reinforced.

Then in the Meiji period (1862- 1912) such a binding of Buddhism with emperor worship via domestic ancestral rites was rekindled, with the addition of the *kukotu* ideology being disseminated through the education system. Until the end of the Second World War, children were brought up to believe that they were part of a long unbroken history of close-

knit harmonious communities owing loyalty and obedience to their ancestors and ultimately the emperor. However, the Meiji government's attempt to establish Shinto as the national religion eventually failed as a result of the way *sosen sūhai* had by now, with almost 300 years of being tied to the state, become synonymous with Buddhism. Indeed, this link still remains even though no longer serving political ends.

### **Personal Expression**

Since the Second World War, Japan's increasing urbanization has had enormous impact on both the structure and ideology of the *ie*. Contemporary city-dwelling conjugal families owe no allegiance to their ancestors based on inheritance of property or long-term co-residence. An agrarian lifestyle, kinship ties and a sense of the presence of the natural world is no longer the norm for many Japanese people. Yet, in spite of the waning household system, interaction between the living and the dead continues, suggesting that it is not dependent on institutional factors. Rather its persistence has to do with the importance of the more personal dimension. For *sosen sūhai* is not only about kinship solidarity but also remembering particular individuals, something that is reflected in the increasing personalization of funerals. In the context of the nuclear family the emphasis has shifted from distant ancestors to more immediate kin. Indeed people's conception of ancestors has become more flexible to include family on both sides rather than the patrilineal line.

Thus, ancestral ties continue to find expression through private rituals in domestic spaces that people continue to construct for them. Whilst for many this will still be the traditional *butsudan*, for others it may be a smaller memorial space where photographs and other

personal items are kept. More compact, contemporary style *butsudan* that can be easily accommodated in a small apartment are now available as *temotokayou* or home memorials, reflecting a shift in emphasis from veneration to memorialisation. However the quality of veneration remains in that family ties have come to represent a profound sense of emotional security and belonging for many Japanese people. The sense of gratitude and respect for what the ancestors have left behind has become linked to the sense of owing one's very existence to one's ancestors.

The forms these private rituals may take are highly varied to reflect the nature of the individual to whom they are directed, such as offering their favorite food and flowers and keeping them in touch with those family matters that are likely to be of particular interest to them. The sense of continuity between this world and the next still finds expression in people's concern to provide dead loved ones with those comforts that reflect their particular preferences in life. It finds expression in the continuing belief that the dead depend on the living for their well being, *sozen-sūhai* encompassing *sozen-kuyō*, or praying *for* as well as *to* the ancestors. The sense of responsibility that Japanese people feel for the well-being of their dead informs the funerary and after-rites that assist the spirit's safe and peaceful passage to the afterlife, the emphasis on pollution having shifted to concern for deceased loved ones' individual needs and comfort. Thus for contemporary Japanese people *sozen sūhai* continues to reflect a social world in which the fate of both the living and the dead are profoundly interdependent.

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(See also: Animism; Buddhist Beliefs and Traditions; Communication with the Dead; Shinto Beliefs and Traditions; Holidays of the dead).

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